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With a focus on Mobilization for Youth (MFY) this paper questions whether community action projects are best administered by public or private sponsorship or by a combination of both. MFY is a private organization financed by an NIMH grant and OEO funds. Since its inception in 1959 it has remained administratively independent, but while this system provides relative autonomy in program implementation, a community action project faces problems of gaining support, as shown by attacks on MFY from the press. As an independent organization it had challenged the traditional power structure of both private agencies and city bureaucracies in the community action field, and, as a result, had cut itself off from any established base of support while remaining dependent on public institutions for funds. In response to public criticism, the city administration curtailed the autonomy of MFY programs and instituted a public investigation of its practices. Interested private groups did not defend MFY's position, and the organization has been compromised. (NC)

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An Object Lesson for the War on Poverty

by

George D. Younger

Abstract

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An Object Lesson for the War on Poverty

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SECTION 202 (a)(4) of the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 states that community action programs in President Johnson's war on poverty can be "conducted, administered or coordinated by a public or private nonprofit agency (other than a political party), or a combination thereof." As a result, government offices all over America are working overtime to prepare anti-poverty blueprints for federal fund applications. At the same time, whole segments of the voluntary "private sector," including social work, labor unions, civil rights groups, churches and others,are busy multiplying conferences, consultations, workshops, task forces, mobilizations and working groups to produce an even larger array of proposals. In some instances it has only been necessary to dust off last year's request for a foundation grant and, with proper use of the word "poverty" as punctuation, let last year's thinking do this year's begging.

In the midst of all this discussion and activity, however, little attention has been given to the question of whether it is preferable to have public or private sponsorship of community action programs- "or a combination thereof." Potential sponsors have been too concerned about getting their proposals drawn up and into operation to stop and ask whether they ought to be sponsors at all.

The experience of Mobilization for Youth, Inc. (MFY) during its nearly three years of operation on the Lower East Side of New York City suggests that the form of sponsorship a community action project receives may prove, in the long run, to be the most crucial factor influencing its effectiveness. Certainly, MFY's history raises questions about the ability of a "combination" of public and private sponsors to avoid the obvious difficulties that are expected in programs wholly under governmental or private auspices.

Illusion of Partnership

Nobody was talking about "poverty" when Mobilization presented its first proposal for "a demonstration action-research project for the prevention and control of juvenile delinquency and youthful crime in an urban neighborhood" to the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) in September 1959. In fact, extra appropriations by Congress were required to convince NIMH that it could embark on such an ambitious program in the field of juvenile delinquency. MFY planned a large-scale effort to "mobilize" both public and private initiative in the areas of jobs, education, group work, individual services and community action. The project was both to coordinate existing programs and to begin a number of its own in a low-income, high-delinquency area of 100,000 people, comprising half the Lower East Side.

Although initiated by six settlement houses serving the target area, MFY rejected from the beginning the assumption that existing private agencies would be able to do the job required. Each was so heavily tied to the social work "establishment" and so in need of additional support for current program, it was felt, that placing MFY in its hands might deter innovation and experimentation or divert funds from their most essential uses. Even the Lower Eastside Neighborhoods Association (LENA), a community coordinating organization set up by social agencies, churches and political leaders, was by-passed so that MFY could pursue its objective of delinquency prevention without the possibility of being burdened with extraneous interests. City-wide organizations in the field of social welfare were excluded from anything but an advisory role for the same reason.

At the same time it was decided that none of the existing departments or agencies of city government would serve as principal sponsor of this experiment. Although the New York City Youth Board had carried the public initiative in all previous attempts to deal with juvenile delinquency by methods other than those employed by the Police Department, this agency was given no operational role. The same was true of the Youth Employment Service in job placement, the Health Department in narcotics addiction and the Welfare Department in individual services.

Only in the field of education, where a large share of the funding came from Board of Education appropriations and the program planned to

make heavy use of the public schools, did the project rely on a part of the city government. Mayor Robert F. Wagner served as honorary chairman of the board, the City Administrator was a vice-chairman, and 19 department heads and commissioners sat in board meetings as ex officio members. But Mobilization remained essentially a private effort largely financed by public funds.

To those who planned this arrangement, such a composite board seemed to guarantee that MFY could avoid domination either by the existing private agencies or by the city government. Instead, it appeared possible to work out a fruitful partnership between private and public groups, the very "combination thereof" envisioned in Section 202 (a)(4). The resulting failure to realize these possibilities proves now to be less the fault of MFY and its leaders or of the circumstances of its particular situation than of certain peculiar disadvantages built into such an arrangement from the start. In Mobilization's case these were not obvious until the program came under wide-spread public attack, both in the press and in city government.

Compounding the Felony

Mobilization has been from the beginning a vastly complicated program, so much so that the researchers have only been able to follow a small portion of its activities. Its multi-phase approach embraces the following activities in the field of education alone: 240 high school homework helpers tutoring 570 elementary school pupils;

1,196 pupils in 40 special kindergarten and first-grade classes; 56 four-year-olds in preschool classes; nine special reading teachers in a program reaching 2,734 elementary pupils-about half of those needing assistance in the area; special attendance officers; full-time guidance personnel in the area's 14 elementary schools; a school-community relations program to encourage teacher home visits; a curriculum center providing resources and methods relevant to low-income and minority group pupils; and use of community organizers in a parent education program to involve those who do not normally take part in parents' organizations. In this one area $1,377,066 will be spent during 1964-65.

As MFY's program has developed, however, the staff and others responsible for policy have been increasingly convinced that the most significant efforts have been those that try to develop local leadership for attacking community problems or seek to produce institutional change. As a result, greater stress has been placed on the community development program, the very part of MFY's activity that has been under severest criticism from those in positions of power in city government and from established leadership on the Lower East Side. Sponsorship of rent strikes, encouragement of civil rights groups and work with parents' groups that supported the school boycott have drawn sharp protest. These activities and other parts of the community program,

although accounting for only $281,168 out of the total of $5,638,665 to be spent in 1964-65, have been heavily criticized. Included in the criticism has been the newly established Legal Services Unit, which guarantees counsel to low-income and minority-group members whose rights might be threatened by the exercise of public authority in such programs as welfare, public housing, unemployment insurance and the administration of criminal law. It is bad enough to be fighting city hall, but to do it with trained legal staff and appropriated funds is to compound the felony.

If existing private agencies, either local or citywide, had been involved in mounting MFY's attack on juvenile delinquency and community disorganization, their institutional interests might have played a role in framing the program. However, those very institutions, which had been in the field before this special emphasis and would seek to survive after the last appropriation was spent, could also have been a source of support and organizational strength. As it was, when Mobilization came under attack, these agencies were slow to come to its defense and loath to risk their influence openly in an unpopular fight that was not clearly their own. MFY had maintained a large measure of independence from control by the existing private institutions only at the expense of their support when the chips were down.

Freedom...at a Price

As for city government, freedom from direct government operation had also been bought at a price. Department heads and commissioners had already been informed that MFY's programs were the agency's own responsibility. City officials might be consulted during the planning and raise questions in board meetings about operations, but they were not to assume that the staff was an extension of the civil service or that policy could be influenced by the usual bureaucratic in-fighting.

It was not clearly realized by Mobilizations' executives or officers that this situation of relative independence depended on the continued good will of the Mayor and, even more important, on the ability of the City Administrator, who both made top-level decisions in MFY and dealt with the financial affairs of every city agency, to keep city officials to this policy. As socn as the City Administrator's post was vacant and responsibility for reviewing MFY program and policies passed to an Anti-Poverty Operations Board, the picture changed drastically. Newspaper articles charging irregularities in administration and "Leftist infiltration" were printed by reporters who had secured most of their charges from the city officials. In response to the articles, the Anti-Poverty Operations Board placed all city appropriations to the program on a month-to-month basis, and the Mayor quietly kept city officials from the board meetings.

More important, after more than two years of spending its own money and then accounting for that expenditure to the city and other funding sources, Mobilization for Youth, Inc., a private corporation using government funds, was suddenly presented with three requests from City Hall: (1) all bids for purchases of equipment and supplies were to be processed through the city's Department of Purchases; (2) all contracts for rental of space were to be approved by the city's Bureau of Real Estate; and (3) all personnel applications were to be checked by the city's Department of Personnel (presumably for security clearance). Although subsequent negotiations have resulted in a policy making these services "available" to MFY upon its request, the agency was forcibly reminded that it is not as independent as it assumed.

At the height of the press attacks, when the agency was under investigation by the City of New York, Federal agencies that provided funds and the State Senate, board members seriously questioned whether MFY was, indeed, a "private" agency. This was an especially pointed question at the time that the city's Commissioner of Investigation was subpoenaing employees to appear for questioning and had removed both MFY's financial books and personnel records.

If it was to be expected to handle its affairs through the same channels as city departments and could act independently only at the risk of being investigated or overruled by the City or Federal Government, how was it different from a "public" agency? The combination of public and private effort in a privately run agency seemed only to have succeeded in producing the defects of a publicly run effort without any of the leavening results of voluntary initiative.

As the investigations have been completed and the struggle for control of anti-poverty programs within city government has been settled, some of the most pessimistic estimates of Mobilization's situation appear to have been refuted. However, the fact remains that any community action program that seeks at the same time to be relatively independent of public officials and city government, while attempting to operate from a base that is independent of most of the existing private, voluntary institutions, is going to be in a very exposed position and in danger of never gaining the support necessary to carry its plans to completion.

In addition, any effort that combines public and private support is going to be far more dependent on its governmental sources than one that relies wholly or for the most part upon private initiative. And if its sponsors assume that city hall is going to be more lenient and allow greater independence in their case than New York allowed Mobilization,

they are merely adding additional proof to a thesis that already seems to be well proven. Washington, D.C. may be able to counter-balance city hall, but Federal offices cannot eliminate it.

In the wake of the first barrage of attacks by the press, it was significant that almost every agency involved in the program, including MFY's own staff and board, was either silent or tardy in answering. Community leadership and Washington, city, academic and philanthropic backers added to the hollow echoing sound that greeted each new charge. When a petition was circulated a week later throughout the Lower East Side asking the Mayor to continue MFY's activities, its sponsors were a group of local Protestant and Jewish clergy. Their request to City Hall was basically a timid one, but it reaffirmed the importance of MFY's experience for such programs all over the country.

As other proposals in the anti-poverty fight begin to draw public attention away from the difficulties that met this experiment, it will be very tempting for those who support them to say that these have been Mobilization's private troubles. But the record is clear that other projects will have to venture into new areas and challenge established power and authority and face the same hazards that have already beset Mobilization for Youth.

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